

# MIMI GIBSON

## A CHILD IN WESTERNS

Interviewed by Samuel Clemens

Born in 1948 in Renton, WA, one of the hardest working child actresses of the '50s, Mimi Gibson, earned over \$100,000 (in 1963 dollars) from her work in 35 movies and over 100 TV shows.

Q: How did you get into films?

A: My mother got me into the industry. She even changed my name to Mimi Gibson, as my original name was Merilee Sue Gibson. As a toddler, I did print advertisements and competed in a pageant called Miss Glamour in Miniature. An agent saw me and signed me. The studio tried to market me as a modern-day Shirley Temple. It was my salary that supported our family. I left the industry in the '60s and purchased a farm where I lived with my husband Carl for decades.

Q: You were part of an unsold anthology TV pilot, "Theatre of the West".

A: That was an unsold pilot where I played the daughter of an outlaw-turned-sheriff. It had a lot of action. I remember an actor was injured while doing stunts. He was on a horse but I didn't hear about an injury to a horse. He was doing a stunt and was knocked off or fell off. They were taking his clothes off and putting him on a table to see his injuries. There was a crowd of guys and me. I got taken out of there. Darn. Kids are curious. I was traumatized because I'd never seen somebody get hurt like that. It had a lot of promise considering the cast was well known. Randolph Scott was the host and Scott Brady was the star, he was weird. He had an unusual fascination with me. He seemed attracted to me. I told my mother, and she said, "Stay away from him."

Q: One of your better roles was in "At Gunpoint" ('55) with Fred MacMurray and Dorothy Malone. How did you get that role?

A: I was one of 110 girls who auditioned for the role. It was very competitive. It had a great plot. It had a great message. It was a good film. It was mostly boys, which I was always more comfortable with. Fred MacMurray was a delight. I saw him again when I guest-starred on "My Three Sons". Tommy Rettig and I became great friends on the set. Shortly before his death, we were going to testify in court about laws that could benefit younger actors. He died of a heart attack days before the hearing.

Q: You said "Rebel in Town" ('56) was the greatest Western you starred in. What was it like?

A: I recall that it had one of the largest, if not the largest, cast of any production I've worked on. There were a lot of actual cowboys and horses on set, which was refreshing considering I've done Westerns that were less realistic. My recently deceased friend Bobby Clark and I portrayed the children. I remember telling him I had a crush on Ben Cooper, who played Gray Mason. He told Ben and I was humiliated. I didn't wanna continue with the film, but I started to feel better since Ben didn't confront me about it. He was a doll.

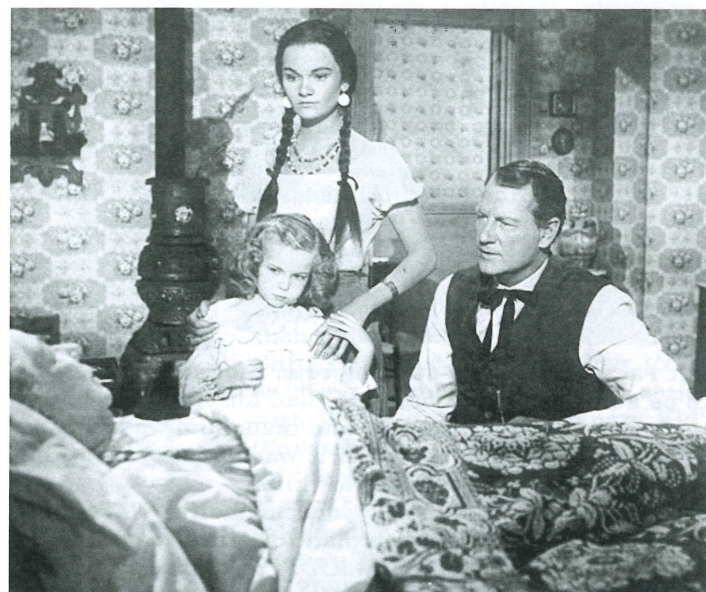
Q: How about John Payne?

A: The cast would laugh about how awkward he looked using an axe during a scene where he was logging. Apparently, he felt uncomfortable using such a dangerous tool.



Q: "The Oklahoman" ('57) starred Joel McCrea. You played his daughter Louise. That was perhaps your biggest box-office success of the '50s. What was Joel McCrea like?

A: Joel McCrea was the most wonderful actor I've ever worked with. I starred in "Houseboat" ('58) alongside Cary Grant the following year, and a columnist interviewed me and asked me who the greatest actor was. He expected me to say Cary Grant, but I said Joel McCrea. The columnist replied, "We can't print that." Cary Grant was fine, but he didn't understand how to speak to children.



Mimi Gibson, Gloria Talbott and Joel McCrea look after a bedridden Esther Dale in "The Oklahoman" ('57).

Q: Although "The Wings of Eagles" ('57) was a drama, you co-starred with John Wayne. What was your impression of him?

A: He was so wonderful towards me and Evelyn [Rudie]. He was somewhat of a mentor and coach to us actually. The three of us did a scene where we unwrapped gifts, but Evelyn and I couldn't get the dialogue. John motivated us by promising he'd give us necklaces if we did the scene flawlessly. That did the trick. After the film was released, he mailed me a mug with a wonderful inscription.

Q: You played Ellen Bryant in "Drango" ('57), which was released by United Artists on a sizable budget.

A: There was a company called Western Costume Co. on Melrose Avenue who supplied the wardrobe for the production. They actually did wardrobe for Westerns of that era because there was a lot of demand for it. They had gorgeous gowns I wanted to try on, but I didn't get to. Since I portrayed a poor child, they had me wear rags. It was an easy role though. I was supposed to act fussy.

Q: You co-starred with Jeff Chandler in that film

A: He was sinfully handsome with a low voice. I had such a crush on him in those days. Since he was a lot older than me, we didn't really talk. He died years ago after an unsuccessful surgery.

Q: "The Tall Man", "The Sheriff of Cochise", "Tales of Wells Fargo", "The Rebel", and "The Rough Riders" were among the TV series you appeared in. Were any of them particularly memorable?

A: "The Rebel" was nice. I adored Nick Adams. Everyone on set did. The set had a certain unity you couldn't find anywhere else. It was known as "the dream set" by the cast. I was saddened to hear of Nick's eventual death. He seemed so happy. "The Sheriff of Cochise" was great. I

almost forgot I did it until someone sent me a copy of it. John [Bromfield] was an icon of masculinity.

**Q:** You've acted in various genres. What would you say was most challenging?

**A:** The greatest challenge for most actors is horseback riding, as a lot of them are afraid to do it. I did a film called "The Courage of Black Beauty" ('57) (below) where the horse I was riding suddenly became frantic and ran across the set. The director feared for my safety. He later told me he was impressed with how calm I was. If he knew the numerous Westerns I did, he would've understood.



**Q:** Was there anyone in the Western genre you didn't like?

**A:** No. There were certainly people in other projects I did that I wasn't fond of. I appeared in "The Children's Hour" and The

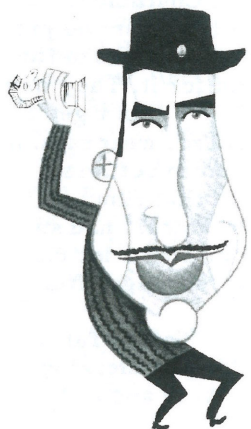
Rat Pack had a guest-starring role. I found Frank Sinatra to be a mean-spirited bully. He had his son drive him to work in a chauffeur's outfit, and made him wash the car in front of us. I don't know if it was a punishment, but it must've been humiliating for him.

**Q:** You recently published your memoirs. What motivated you to do so? Do you plan to return to acting?

**A:** I did. It's titled **WORKING KID**. I published it in 2021, but I'm continuing to do promotional appearances for it. You can read in detail about my adventures in Hollywood. I suppose I wrote it because I wanted to tell my life's story while raising awareness about the difficulties child actors endure. *(When Mini turned 18 she found out all earnings were gone. At the age of 20 she'd become very angry. She skipped collage and got married to get away from her mother.—ed.)* When I left Hollywood in the '60s, I didn't have any money or means of supporting myself until years later when I did real estate. I hope it gives Hollywood an idea of how they should treat and prepare children who are sacrificing a lot to star in their films. I don't wanna do acting, but I'd like to be a coach or mentor to other actors in the community.

## JOHN TRAVOLTA AS PALADIN?

Glad it didn't happen!



Have \$20 million will travel! A resurgence in John Travolta's career in late 1996 propelled him into the role of erudite gunfighter, Paladin, for a big screen version of the very popular '57-'63 TV Western, "Have Gun. Will Travel". Travolta signed a \$20 million contract in late September '96 to play the dark knight of the old West, originally brought to life by Richard Boone. Three studios were vying for rights to the film at that time. Could the New York accented former 'sweathog'

of "Welcome Back Kotter" live up to Boone's performance? Thank God we'll never know!

## REMEMBERING DICK CURTIS

Often known as the 'meanest man in Hollywood,' there was never any doubt when ox-like Dick Curtis came on screen he was a "heavy" in the truest sense of the word. Born Richard D. Dye May 11, 1902, in horse country, Newport, KY, his parents later moved to L.A. where Dick received his education. The 6'3" Curtis started in films as an extra in 1919. He soon left, finding stage



work more productive in the East where he had three years of New York stage experience and played stock in New Jersey and Massachusetts. Curtis returned to Hollywood in '30 and by '32 was in four pictures that year. Several months later, during the making of "King Kong", he was seriously injured and didn't work for over a year. Resuming work at a fever pitch by late '34, Westerns and serials became his main niche. Dick seemed to find a home at Columbia in '37. They kept Curtis busy not only in their B-Westerns, but in virtually everything they made, including serials. Over the years Curtis worked on 17 serials, sometimes just a henchman or bit part, but much bigger roles as crippled henchie Korman in "Flying G-Men" ('39), Pegleg's right-hand man in "Overland With Kit Carson" ('39), the evil Fang in "Terry and the Pirates" ('40) and a swarthy Tartar in "The Phantom" ('43). His cohort in crime at Columbia, Kenneth MacDonald recalled, "Socially, he was somewhat reclusive. This trait, in fact, was evident in production procedures. He was a thinker regarding his roles, and a strict professional. He found it uneasy to compromise. I felt, at one time, his thinking might lead him to an interest in direction. However, this never occurred. He enjoyed cutting and assembling film clips for whatever purpose." Fellow badman Pierce Lyden once wrote, "Dick was so bad even the people who worked with him hated him. (laughs)" There's a notable break in his film work from late '46 to mid '49. It was at this time Curtis discovered what he figured would be a terrific location site in the high desert above Twenty-Nine Palms, California, and, along with Russell Hayden, Roy Rogers, Bud Abbott and some members of the Sons of the Pioneers, 17 partners in all at \$500 each, they developed the area for filming of Westerns and serials. Gene Autry's Flying A Productions, ZIV TV's "Cisco Kid" and, eventually, Russell Hayden's production of "Judge Roy Bean" were the primary users of the locale they named Pioneertown. Columbia's "Cody of the Pony Express" serial ('50) was also lensed there. In the early '50s Curtis found work in television and a couple of good serial roles, gunman Campo in "Roar of the Iron Horse" ('51) and as chief heavy Regan in "Government Agents Vs. The Phantom Legion" ('51) just prior to his untimely death January 13, 1952, at only 49. Cause of death was listed due to respiratory failure, lung cancer and a brain tumor.